

## Reflection 1: Students as Researchers, Qld

# Beyond the project:

## Recognising children's commitment to research as subjects and participants

When engaging with children for the purposes of research, one area that is often overlooked by school communities is the value placed by children on their participation in the process beyond the direct results of a study. When children commit to participation in research, they hold a genuine desire for their contributions to be taken seriously. In reality however, this commitment is often unrecognised by those not directly involved in the project.

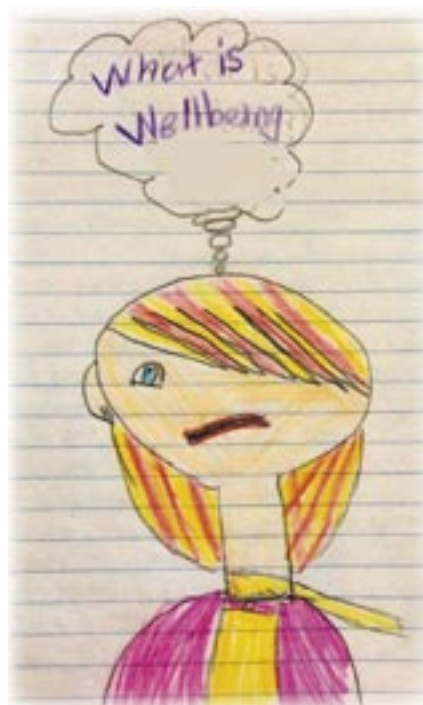
For six months, 61 children in three southeast Queensland primary schools participated in a students as researchers project that first involved conceptualising wellbeing and then translating it into practices for school improvement<sup>1</sup>.

With a focus on school wellbeing pedagogy, the children discussed and explored their individual conceptualisations of wellbeing in small groups to develop a focus for their student inquiry projects. Each group investigated different aspects of wellbeing at school, with all groups focusing on either school improvement, school sustainability, or an issue affecting their wellbeing at school. Throughout the project, the children were mentored and supported in research skill development by the university researchers.

Alongside the focus of the children's projects, the university researchers were also studying the methodological implications of participatory research with children. Of particular interest to the (adult) researchers were the children's perspectives on their own roles in the process of school improvement and student voice. From the students' perspective, were the views of children

taken seriously at school? Did the students believe they had a voice powerful enough to enact change?

Despite what many schools and teachers say, it seems that, in this and other projects, many children simply don't think they will have any impact: *"Maybe... probably not... like it's a possibility... 50/50... whoever it ends up with. If it ends up with [teacher] there's more chance..."* and *"Probably not, 'cause we're just kids. The other kids might but you have to be someone the little kids know."*



There are two ways that this could be explained. Either the members of the school community don't believe the children can make worthwhile contributions, or they simply are not aware that the children have something to say. Both explanations have problems, but they might also come from the same root cause: small group educational research. Often, children involved in school based research are simply considered 'absent' from class for a specified time with teachers and classmates rarely paying attention to what they are doing during the absence. This is particularly evident when there is a cap on participation numbers or only a few of the children in a given class are participating. As a result, their contributions to research and the efforts of their involvement in a project are often ignored or misunderstood.

But, if no one knows what you're doing while you're out of class why would they be interested in your contributions to knowledge? When children either express their view or demonstrate their capacity it is often in the presence of only a few people: school leaders, researchers or other children. As such, the right forum for demonstrating capacity is often not available in the daily life of a school. As a result, the participants in a project do not feel appreciated by the wider school community.

While there has been significant discussion in *Connect* and elsewhere showcasing the potential of student voice and students as researchers projects, there has been less attention paid to the extent to which the outcomes of such projects are taken seriously and result in lasting change. Initiatives by children in a culture where voice is limited or is not part of the school plan, may never get off the ground.

<sup>1</sup> The researchers would like to acknowledge that this project was undertaken with the assistance and support from the Brisbane Catholic Education (BCE), who funded the project through their Research Grants Program.

Indeed, if the projects do not have a local 'champion' and have not been initiated by school personnel with a direct interest in its development, maintenance, importance and sustainability they are unlikely to succeed.

In our project, each of the school principals were very receptive to the project and keen to find out the results, however there was noticeably less investment (time commitment and belief) by many of the other school staff; there was no local champion to either support the ideas, or the children who generated them. In fact, in some instances, teachers commented (perhaps in jest) that they were happy that certain students were participating as it would give them a much deserved break from that child's behaviour and continual classroom distraction.

As our project had no exclusionary criteria for participation, many students who are not normally selected for opportunities such as this, opted to participate. To this end, many of the voices obtained were from those students typically viewed as lacking the capacity, ability, maturity, or behaviour to be given such a responsibility.

Such viewpoints were reiterated by the children in their own reflections on the question: *'What do you hope the school will do with the information that you share from your projects?'* They expressed significant scepticism and uncertainty that anyone in their school (adults or children) would take the findings and recommendations from their projects seriously and, even if they did, the children doubted that much would actually change as a result. Nevertheless, the children said that they **hoped** the school would take their findings into consideration: *"I'm not really sure actually. They might do a few things if they think our information is good, then maybe they might."*

While the children did not expect much change to come about as a result of their projects, a hope for some acknowledgement and recognition of all of their hard work as well as their

involvement and commitment to the project, dominated their reflections.

These reflections have alerted us to a significant issue in student participatory work. **How can student participation and voice be truly effective if the school culture is ultimately one that does not enable these processes?** These experiences are not unique to this project, as we have found similar concerns expressed by children of the same age in other projects conducted by the authors (see Gillett-Swan, 2013, 2014, 2017; Gillett-Swan & Bland, 2016; Sargeant, 2014; Sargeant & Gillett-Swan 2015).



If it is only the university researchers and a few school staff who value the children's input and perspectives, how ethical is the process if the children experience limited local benefit? In research such as ours that seeks to explore children's perspectives on wellbeing, a contradictory effect may result. Their participation may in itself lessen the child's wellbeing if they experience either antipathy toward their contributions or an outright rejection of their ideas.

As much as children can be resentful if their involvement is tokenistic, they can also feel undervalued and unmotivated if their time, effort, and contributions go unrecognised: *"They'll do nothing with it. Hope they say we did a good job."*

This is not to say that seeking student voice in schools should stop; indeed, more work is needed in those schools

that do not already have a voice inclusive participatory culture. Only when the **value** rather than the **process** of gathering the student voice is more widely accepted will the potential of the child's contribution be fully realised beyond those adults, schools, and industries who already believe in it.

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